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The Regulation of Undergraduate Academic Dress at Oxford and Cambridge, 1660–1832

by William Gibson

The Whiggish treatment of the eighteenth century by historians up to the 1960s tended to the opinion that most the features of the Church and State were corrupt and unreformed, until the Victorian zeal for improvement changed things for the better. This applies as much to the universities. Indeed the Cambridge historian D. A. Winstanley encapsulated this in the titles of his books, *Unreformed Cambridge* being that of his study of late eighteenth-century Cambridge.¹ In matters of academic dress also there is an impression that between the Laudian and other statutes of the seventeenth century and the reforms of the Victorian period there was increasingly chaotic practice in dress and an abandonment of the statutory rules governing it.² The analogy is that just as the Reform Act of 1832 and the Whig reforms of the 1830s improved Parliament and society, and the Ecclesiastical Commission's reforms of the 1840s improved the Church, so the reform of regulations at Cambridge in 1870 and 1889, and 1857 at Oxford, improved and modernized a decayed system of academic dress. Just as there has been an abandonment of Whig history in the study of religion and society, which has shown that the eighteenth century witnessed both reform and revision in many fields, so it is the argument presented here that the system of academic dress in the period between the Restoration and the Reform Act was comparatively conformist and on at least two occasions was regulated at both Oxford and Cambridge.

W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley's *A History of Academical Dress in Europe until the End of the Eighteenth Century* provides an exhaustive treatment of academic dress of both graduates and undergraduates;³ the purpose of this study is to draw on a range of contemporary sources to illustrate the features of undergraduate academic dress. It is also to place the changes to eighteenth century undergraduate academic dress in a context of a form of dress increasingly dissonant with lay and civil dress. Thus the period 1660–1832 is one in which the undergraduate—arguably the university member most strongly influenced by civilian dress—was regulated to wear dress most at odds with his lay peers. Inevitably this led both to tensions and to breaches of regulations, some countenanced as were the reforms of 1769–73, others not tolerated. What follows then is a redaction of scholarship of undergraduate academic dress of the period, with a fresh insight into the issues of class, status and fashion drawn from contemporary sources.

¹ D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1935).

² In fact, of course, the revision of dress at Cambridge excluded King's College.

³ (Oxford, 1963; repr. Westport, CT, 1978).

In 1674 Charles II expressed himself scandalized by the laxity in academic dress at Cambridge and insisted on a return to the pre-Civil War regulations, and thereafter the regulations were firmly enforced. In June 1681 the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge issued a proclamation:

Whereas several undergraduates and Bachelors of Arts have of late neglected to wear such gowns as by Order and Custom are proper for their rank and standing in the University, whereby the common distinction of Degrees is taken away, upon which have followed many and great inconveniences. It is this day in Consistory resolv'd, order'd and decreed by the Vice-Chancellor with the consent of the Heads of Colleges ... that none residing in the University under the degree of Master of Arts shall hereafter upon any pretence whatsoever be allowed to appear publickly either in or out of colleges in mourning gowns, or gowns made after that fashion, or any other but what by Order and Custom of the University belong to their degree and standing.⁴ And that if any shall presume after the feast day of St Barnabas next following the date of this decree and act contrary to the tenor of it, he shall be proceeded against and punished with all the severity that such disobedience and contumacy shall deserve.⁵

Generally, of course, a BA might be assumed to have attained a social as well as academic distinction and, whilst technically not *in statu pupillari*, he remained subject to the authority of the university on matters of dress. Similarly masters and doctors were not free from university authority in this regard. At Oxford also, following Vice-Chancellor Fell's reassertion of Laudian rules in 1666, patterns for gowns, hoods and hats were made and stored in the Convocation House and tailors warned that they risked punishment if they diverged from the patterns by so much as a 'nail's breadth'.⁶

Throughout the 'long' eighteenth century undergraduates at both universities were differentiated into four principal classes: noblemen; gentlemen-commoners (at Cambridge fellow-commoners); scholars (including pensioners at Cambridge); and servitors (sometimes known at Cambridge as sizars and also at Oxford as battlers).⁷ At Oxford there was an additional group, commoners, between scholars and servitors. Each of these classes of undergraduates was entitled to a different form of dress.⁸

⁴ Professor Bruce Christianson has pointed out to me that mourning gowns had pudding sleeves and were condemned at Oxford in 1689, and four years later a member of Convocation was denied a vote while wearing such a gown; the gown was suppressed at Cambridge for those below MA in 1681 though it remained available as an alternative to the MA gown as undress for the DD.

⁵ Quoted in C. Wordsworth, *Social Life at the English Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1874), pp. 514–15.

⁶ C. E. Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford*, 3 vols (London, 1924–27), Vol. II (1924), p. 333.

⁷ Because they were entitled to eat free of charge at the common table and to charge food to the college battlers.

⁸ At Oxford there was also a class of Student of Civil Law who had their own gowns, and, like today's BCL candidates, occupied an intermediate position in the University. SCLs had been on their college's books for four years but had no BA. I owe this to Bruce Christianson. Loggan described SCLs as 'Juris Civilis Studiosus non graduatus postquam.'

Dress as a mark of status: noblemen

Noblemen at Oxford since 1490 (and following clarification in 1576) were entitled to wear silk and brocaded gowns of bright colours.⁹ Such rich materials emphasized noble status, as did the costly dyes. The gowns had flap collars,



Nobleman at Oxford (1675)

Tudor bag sleeves with gold lace decorations (akin to the black lace decorations used today on Oxford gimp gowns)¹⁰ and a velvet round cap with a gold tassel or tuft was worn. This was a pattern comparable to the doctor's undress gown, also suggesting a status comparable to the most senior academics. In 1712 the *Guardian* referred to the undergraduate nobleman's fashion for green velvet sleeves turned up to reveal the flash of colour; such touches enabled noble undergraduates to keep abreast of fashionable trends in clothing.¹¹ Lord Fitzwilliam, as a nobleman at Trinity College, Oxford, in 1764, wore a pink gown with gold lace,¹² and in 1790 George Selwyn, tutor to Lady Carlisle's son, wrote

⁹ Noblemen were technically 'nobiles minorum gentium' and included the sons of bishops, knights and baronets and, by resolution of Convocation, could include heirs of esquires.

¹⁰ In the feverish atmosphere in the University of Oxford between 1714 and 1720 Whigs and Tories adopted gowns of different patterns as a badge of their party and dynastic allegiance, the Whigs wore 'pudding sleeve' gowns, the Tories MA gowns (Wordsworth, *Social Life*, p. 36).

¹¹ *Guardian*, 18 March 1712/13. The sons of Irish and Scottish peers were required to dress in darker colours, which Hargreaves-Mawdsley ascribes to their disqualification from seats in the House of Lords. This argument lacks force after the Union with Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1801.

¹² A. D. Godley, *Oxford in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), p. 164.

advising her on a gown for the young nobleman. Selwyn hoped that Lady Carlisle approved of his choice of colour for her son's silk gown:

I think light blue celeste, which Lord Stafford had, would be detestable, and scarlet is too glaring. No, it must be a good deep green.¹³



Nobleman in full dress at Cambridge (1815)

Clearly there was a common knowledge of which noblemen favoured particular colours. The desire of noblemen to keep in touch with fashionable trends outside the universities led to some relaxation of regulations. For example, at Cambridge after 1750 noblemen, as well as non-regent MAs, were permitted to wear a tall hat instead of the velvet round cap,¹⁴ and there was a special nobleman's gown for state occasions which was bright blue, richly trimmed with gold lace, worn with a cap tassel of gold. At King's College the nobleman's state gown was enhanced with 'bishop's sleeves'.¹⁵ Such rich dress made for some considerable display: in 1792 an undergraduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, described

In silk, gay lords the streets parade
Gold tassels nodding overhead.¹⁶

¹³ H.M.C. Carlisle MSS, Vol. VI, p. 689.

¹⁴ At Oxford such lay headwear was always illegal.

¹⁵ J. R. Tanner (ed.), *The Historical Register of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1917), p. 197. Bishop's sleeves were large voluminous sleeves such as bishops wore on their lawn rochets.

¹⁶ Quoted in Godley, p. 167.

Thus the nobleman undergraduate could enjoy marks of distinctive status as well as opportunities to follow fashions in colour and headwear. About 1799 one description of a nobleman undergraduate was:

A gay golden tuft on his cap he displays
Which dazzles all eyes with its ravishing rays
True badge of nobility, awful and grand
Confined to the essence and cream of the land ...
How I love to adore thee with honours divine
To count thy bright favour and bask in thy shine.¹⁷

Inevitably perhaps those who courted the favour of such exalted undergraduates—fellow undergraduates as well as tradesmen—were sometimes called ‘tuft hunters’. Indeed at Oxford those who wore ‘golden tassel and silk gowns’ were said to be ‘infested’ by flatterers.¹⁸

Fellow- and gentlemen-commoners

Gentlemen-commoners at Oxford, and fellow-commoners at both universities, were distinguished by their armigerous status and the payment of full fees to the college and university. They ate with the fellows although they were commoners.



Gentleman-Commoner at Oxford (1674)

¹⁷ A. Allardyce, *Letters of Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, The New Oxford Guide* (London, 1885), Vol. I, Introduction.

¹⁸ G. Midgley, *University Life in Eighteenth-Century Oxford* (London, 1996), pp. 11, 13.

At Oxford they were entitled to wear velvet and silk round caps, with a black silk tassel;¹⁹ and silk gowns, though they were denied the bright colours of the noblemen.²⁰ The gentleman-commoner's gown was black, though it was also decorated with buttons, silk lace or rows of tufts, and used a winged-sleeved pattern in Edwards's and Loggan's illustrations. Jeremy Bentham paid £1 12s 6d for his son's gentleman-commoner's gown and seven shillings for a cap.²¹ Though denied the colours of the nobleman, gentlemen-commoners' gowns were rich enough to be a mark of social distinction. Richard Polewhele described the Oxford gentleman-commoner as wearing:

... the velvet cap, whose power
Exempts from care the frolic hour
There gives, as triumph lights her face,
The silken gown its fringed grace
And bids its rustle in the breeze
A sanction to the sons of ease
And still, with supercilious air
The tufted cap of folly wear.²²

In 1721 the Oxford student newspaper *Terrae Filius* published the 'Academicum; or, The Gentleman-commoner's Matriculation'. In it, the newly minted gentleman-commoner arranged his garb:

I sallied forth to deck my back
With loads of tufts and gown of black
Prunello²³
My back equipt, it was not fair
My head should 'scape, as so square
As chessboard
A cap I bought, my skull to screen
Of cloth without, and all within
Of pasteboard.²⁴

Terrae Filius also described a gentleman-commoner as an 'Oxford smart':

When he walks down the street he is easily distinguished by a stiff silk gown, which rustles in the wind ... a square cap of above twice the usual size ... his clothes lined with tawdry silk.²⁵

¹⁹ After 1675 they were entitled to square caps.

²⁰ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 93.

²¹ Midgley, p. 19.

²² R. Polewhele, *The Follies of Oxford* (London, 1785), p. 142.

²³ Prunello was a coarse wool. I owe this to Susan North.

²⁴ *Terrae Filius*, No. 41, June 1721, in N. Amhurst, *Terrae-Filius, or the Secret History of the University of Oxford, in Several Essays to Which are Added Remarks on a Late Book Entitled 'University Education' by R. Newton DD* (London, 1754), pp. 215–17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 245–46.

Clearly some ‘smarts’ ignored the rules regarding headwear. At Trinity College, Cambridge fellow-commoners were distinguished from those of other colleges by a blue rather than black gown, a zigzag silver braid on the facings of their gowns and a silver tassel on their caps.

Noblemen and gentlemen-commoners often had an undress gown for daily wear and a dress gown for formal occasions. At Magdalen College, Oxford it was the custom for both nobles and gentlemen-commoners to appear in full dress for all meals.²⁶ Pensioners elected to fellowships (for which undergraduates could also qualify) were distinguished at Cambridge by the privilege of dining at the fellows’ table with wine and gowns with velvet collars and silver and gold lace of particular shapes for each college.²⁷

Scholars, commoners and pensioners

In 1666 Vice-Chancellor Fell ordered Oxford scholars (‘foundation men’) to wear wide-sleeved gowns, whose extent was to the finger ends of the wearer and not to exceed an ell in circumference.²⁸ This bell-sleeved gown was worn with a square cap, made from cloth (rather than velvet). Similar gowns and caps were worn at Cambridge by pensioners on the foundation at Peterhouse, King’s and Queens’. At Trinity College, Cambridge, the gown was blue.

At Oxford commoners were a separate class of undergraduate, paying their own fees and not associated with the foundation of their colleges, though they were not armigerous. Fell laid down that commoners should wear a gown with a flap collar with streamers, or leading strings. The gown was in the same style as the modern Oxford ‘Graduate Student’ gown, but ankle-length and with the streamers decorated with three bands of ruched black braid decorated with buttons.²⁹ They wore a round cap, one of which cost Henry Brougham between two and three shillings and sixpence in the late seventeenth century. In 1770 commoners were ordered to wear the square cloth cap with a silk tassel and their gowns had lost their buttons but had gained pleats in large squares in a line below the flap collar. Within the next twenty years the streamers broadened and lengthened to the ankle.³⁰

John Skinner at Oxford toward the end of the eighteenth century referred to his gown as,

Behind our gowns (black Bombazine)³¹
Are sewed two leading strings, I ween
To teach young students in their course
They still have need of learning’s nurse.³²

²⁶ T. Seccombe and H. S. Scott (ed), *In Praise of Oxford* (London, 1911), Vol. II, ‘Life and Manners’, p. 616.

²⁷ Tanner, p. 196.

²⁸ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 97.

²⁹ By a statute of 1675 all gowns were ordered to be ‘talaes’, i.e. ankle length.

³⁰ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, pp. 98–100.

³¹ Bombazine was a mixture of silk and worsted. I owe this point to Susan North.

³² British Library, Add. MSS, 33,634, f. 10.

The reference to ‘leading strings’, used by ostlers in training their horses and by parents and nurses in the training and control of children, suggested that, unlike noblemen or gentlemen-commoners, the commoner was much more likely to be treated as the inferior of the tutors and dons and directly under their authority.

At Cambridge pensioners at colleges where most undergraduates were not on the foundation wore gowns and caps similar to those used by commoners at Oxford, although the sleeveless gown had lost its streamers by the late eighteenth century.

At both universities there was a plethora of exceptions in dress for scholars and exhibitioners, usually based on specified colleges, scholarships or foundations. Westminster scholars at Trinity College, Cambridge, and at Christ Church, Oxford, wore a gown with large open sleeves, and the Duchess of Somerset’s exhibitioners at St John’s College, Cambridge, wore square caps without tufts or tassels.³³



Commoner at Oxford (1770)

Sizars and servitors

At the bottom of the undergraduate hierarchy came the servitor, sometimes at Cambridge called the sizar, and, at Oxford, the batteler.³⁴ These were the poorest students admitted to the universities on the basis that they acted as servants in

³³ See also Hargreaves-Mawdsley, pp. 132 et seq.

³⁴ The class was abolished in 1867. Sizarships remained at Cambridge up to 1902 by which time they were worth an income of £40 a year. Bruce Christianson has pointed out that servitors, battelers, sizars and sub-sizars probably enjoyed their own hierarchy, though by the middle of the eighteenth century this was breaking down.

colleges, usually to gentlemen-commoners and noblemen, in return for their tuition, board and lodging. At Cambridge they were sometimes derisively called 'hounds'.³⁵ A servitor wore a black stuff gown without any marks of status such as buttons, sleeves or streamers. These plain sleeveless gowns were sometimes nicknamed 'curtains'.³⁶ They were usually black but on occasion were also dark blue,³⁷ presumably the same hue as the 'toga coloris violacei' used by scholars at Trinity College, Cambridge.³⁸ The collar flap of servitors was round and that of battelers was square.³⁹ Servitors also wore a simple round cap, sometimes known as the 'thrum cap' and often likened by detractors to a cowpat.⁴⁰ At Cambridge the round cap was sometimes called the 'Monmouth cap'. This round cap was also used by battelers, such as Henry Fleming, who paid three shillings for his in 1681 at Oxford. Battelers were a class of Oxford undergraduate below commoners and slightly above servitors. Their food was paid for by a nobleman or gentleman-commoner, for whom they undertook lighter duties such as cleaning shoes. When in 1682 Fleming progressed to become a scholar on the foundation of his college he paid a further five shillings for a square cap. He appears to have gone through both round and square caps pretty fast, buying four square caps in fourteen months, suggesting that such headwear took a considerable level of wear and tear.⁴¹

Headwear, perhaps more than gowns, was a source of tension for undergraduates whose status was marked by their caps. The square and round caps used at Oxford were lampooned in verse in 1691:

Some trenchers on their heads have got
As black as younder porridge pot
And some have things exactly such
As my old Gammers mumbles' pouch
Which fits upon his head as neat
As 'twere sew'd to't by every pleat.⁴²

The Servitour, a poem of 1739 portrayed a servitor with ragged circular hat, threadbare gown so thin the light shone through it. His gown was greasy and 'clotted with sweat' of ten years' service.⁴³

³⁵ D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge*, p. 192.

³⁶ C. Wordsworth, *The Undergraduate from 'Social Life at the English Universities in the Eighteenth Century'*, revised, edited and abridged by J. Brimley Roberts (London, 1928), p. 148. Curtains were abolished in 1834.

³⁷ J. R. Green, G. Robertson and C. L. Stanier (eds), *Studies in Oxford History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford Historical Society, 41, (Oxford, 1901), p. 37.

³⁸ See Logan plates.

³⁹ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 100.

⁴⁰ Midgley, p. 14.

⁴¹ J. R. Macgrath, (ed), *The Flemings in Oxford*, Oxford Historical Society, 62, (Oxford, 1913), Vol. II, pp. 15, 83, 117.

⁴² *Academia: Or the Humours of the University of Oxford in Burlesque Verse...* (Oxford, 1691), p. 34.

⁴³ Wordsworth, *Social Life*, p. 102.

Agitation for change

For some commoners and servitors their academic dress became a source of shame for their lowly standing in the universities. ‘Lampoon’, a character in Colley Cibber’s 1704 play *An Act at Oxford*, denounced scholars in the following terms:

I hate your odious gowns, like so many daggie-tail Questmen, and your filthy square caps that serve only to teach one to squint.⁴⁴

Similarly in 1730 Thomas Hearne bemoaned that servitors

scorn to wear their proper habits, their gowns being not what properly belong to servitors ... and their caps ... being what (when I came to Oxford) the commoners wore.⁴⁵

At meals in the college halls the servitors and scholars were also separated from the noblemen, gentlemen-commoners and Bachelors of Arts.⁴⁶ Richard Newton’s plans for a new college at Oxford, Hart Hall, included such provision for the lowest undergraduates:

Extending from the high raised floor
In length: we count two tables more
For me and my compeers
That is, for youths with leading strings
And sleeveless gowns, poor awkward things ...⁴⁷

The discontent of the servitors at their ‘caps of servility’ and lowly gown came to a head in both universities in the period 1769 to 1770. In 1750 the *Gentleman’s Magazine* described their hats as ‘frightful things’. In 1750 a Cambridge University regulation ordered those *in statu pupillari*—effectively pensioners and servitors rather than noblemen and fellow-commoners, who were not deemed to be *in statu pupillari*—to wear clothes of ‘grave colour’ without lace, fringe or embroidery and without bright colours. Bachelors’ gowns were to be made of prunello or ‘prince’s stuff’ and the only restriction on noblemen was an inhibition from wearing lace on their caps.⁴⁸ The agitation for change may well reflect the influence of civil dress and the blurring of social distinctions outside the universities. As Lawrence Stone has pointed out, England, in comparison with other European countries in the eighteenth century, was an ‘open elite’ in which merit and skill strongly influenced social standing. And yet, ironically, in the

⁴⁴ Quoted in Midgley, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Hearne’s diary 14 May 1730, quoted in Midgley, p. 14.

⁴⁶ The slit in the sleeve of the BA gown was introduced at Cambridge to allow ease of dining (C. Wordsworth, *The Undergraduate*, p. 148).

⁴⁷ R. Newton, *A Scheme of Discipline ... to be established ... in Hart Hall* (Oxford, 1720), p. 29.

⁴⁸ Wordsworth, *The Undergraduate*, p. 119.

universities this social mobility was restrained by what servitors and sizars viewed as their habits of shame.⁴⁹

The dissatisfaction of servitors with their lowly dress, and particularly their dislike of round caps led to a campaign at Cambridge by Charles Farish in 1769 to persuade the heads of Houses to change the regulation requiring them.⁵⁰ The campaign coincided with the election of the Duke of Grafton as the Chancellor of the University. Grafton agreed to the change for his installation ceremony, so that undergraduates could attend ‘in a dress more decent and becoming’, and in the wake of the decision the Council permitted general use of cloth square caps for servitors and pensioners.⁵¹ The *Cambridge Chronicle* of 1 July 1769 punned:

What ancients and what moderns vainly sought
Cambridge with ease, hath both attained and taught
The truth even envy must herself allow
For all her scholars square the circle now.

Oxford was not far behind Cambridge, although change here resulted from greater discontent with the round cap. In 1770, perhaps influenced by the change at Cambridge, the servitors of Christ Church revolted *en masse* and adopted the dress of ‘foundationers’ or scholars. In turn the scholars were discomforted by



Pensioner of Trinity College and Sizar at Cambridge (1815)

⁴⁹ L. Stone, *An Open Elite?* (Oxford, 1983).

⁵⁰ Farish's campaign was part of a wider attempt to persuade the University to allow fellows to marry.

⁵¹ Wordsworth, *The Undergraduate*, pp. 134–35.

such association and, disliking the possibility of confusion with servitors, they in turn adopted the larger gowns of Bachelors of Arts. In response some of the heads of Houses demanded that the University should rigorously enforce the Laudian Statute XIV of 1633: 'De Vestitu et Habitu Scholastico'. Nevertheless in the Hebdomadal Council the servitors' unilateral action was endorsed but, with strong campaigning from the Proctors, this was later overruled by the Congregation of the University. By the summer of 1770 a new regulation was imposed—replacing the Laudian statutes—that reached a compromise between the need to endorse the status of scholars and 'higher' undergraduates and to relieve the servitors of their hated round caps. Servitors were permitted to wear the square cap, but without a tuft or tassel. Scholars were confirmed in their right to wear a gown like that of the Bachelor of Arts but with shortened sleeves to distinguish them from graduates. Noblemen were confirmed in their right to wear coloured silk and gold lace, though the sons of baronets and knights were now limited to black silk gowns with gold lace. Gentlemen-commoners were confirmed in their right to wear a black silk gown with a velvet square cap.⁵² The 1770 change was endorsed by the production of formal patterns of gowns and engravings.⁵³

The enforcement of regulations

The enforcement of the 1769 and 1770 regulations seems to have been fairly effective—at least initially. In the 1770s Edmund Gibbon recorded his reaction to academic dress at Oxford. He observed that while noblemen 'dress according to their fancy and fortune ... , the uniform habit of the academics, the square cap and black gown, is adapted to the civil and even clerical profession; and from the Doctors of Divinity to the undergraduate, the degrees of learning and age are extremely distinguished.'⁵⁴ The effectiveness of the regulations can also be judged by those who transgressed them. In at least one case the prospect of transgression thoroughly embarrassed an undergraduate. In 1778 John James arrived at Queen's College Oxford with a cap and gown that he had ordered to be made by a London tailor, who was clearly not versed in the patterns of the University's gowns. Unfortunately when he reached Oxford, James realized that the style of the gown was neither that of the commoner nor of the gentleman-commoner, being, he told his father, 'a mongrel kind.' James was warned he would be hooted at in the street for wearing such an unconventional gown, and consequently he wrote to his father asking for money for a gown that conformed to the usual pattern.⁵⁵ Similarly in 1784 the correspondent of a young Oxford scholar explained that he would quickly learn the dress code that denoted the undergraduate hierarchy. He would soon be shocked 'if a servitor should dare to be so irregular as to put on a gentleman-commoner's cap' and he himself would 'never think of putting a gold tassel on [his] own cap.'⁵⁶ The following year Polewhele referred to

⁵² Godley, pp. 166–67

⁵³ Mallet, Vol. III, p. 194.

⁵⁴ Seccombe and Scott, p. 750.

⁵⁵ Midgley, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Letter to a Young Gentleman of Fortune, Just Entered at University* (Oxford, 1784), p.

undergraduates who feared ‘the terror of the velvet sleeve’ of the Proctors who would punish infringement of the dress regulations.⁵⁷ One author in 1788 proposed that infringement of the rules of academic dress should be punished by six months rustication and expulsion on the third offence.⁵⁸ Thus, though gradually diverging from lay dress, the reforms of 1769 and 1770 seem to have commanded a considerable measure of assent within the universities.

All undergraduates were also required to wear appropriate neckcloths or bands. In 1778 bands, known as ‘the saintly ornament’, were an absolute requirement for undergraduates.⁵⁹ Undergraduates who wore black neckcloths in public were ordered back to their college to change into white neckcloths or bands.⁶⁰ Wearing boots with academic dress was also absolutely forbidden for those below the level of DD; inceptors in Divinity earned the privilege in 1733 at Oxford, but shoes were required for all others.⁶¹ In 1793 the penalty for wearing boots was described:

But the whole set, pray understand
Must walk full dress, in cap and band
For should grave Proctor chance to meet
A buck in boots along the street
He stops his course and with permission
Asks his name, sets imposition.⁶²

The importance of the distinctions between different classes of undergraduates was keenly felt by many eighteenth-century members of the universities. Hence Skinner versified in the 1790s:

Such nice distinctions one perceives
In cuts of gowns, and hoods, and sleeves
Marking degrees, or style, or station
Of members free or on foundation ...⁶³

Abandoning the undergraduate dress

Undergraduates who advanced to the degree of Bachelor of Arts were often pleased to assume the gown that signalled their status had risen above that of an undergraduate. In some measure it freed them from the distinctions of servitor, commoner, scholar, gentleman-commoner and nobleman—though it placed them on the lowest rung of the ladder of degrees. Almost a century before the reforms mentioned above, Abraham de la Pryme graduated at Oxford in January 1694

⁵⁷ Polewhele, p. 160.

⁵⁸ *Remarks on the Enormous Expense in the Education of Young Men in the University of Cambridge*... (Cambridge, 1788), p. 28.

⁵⁹ Godley, p. 165.

⁶⁰ Seccombe and Scott, p. 616.

⁶¹ Hargreaves-Mawdsley, p. 103.

⁶² Godley, p. 166.

⁶³ Quoted in L. M. Quiller Couch, *Reminiscences of Oxford by Oxford Men, 1559–1850*, Oxford Historical Society, 22 (Oxford, 1892), p. 184.

after three days examination in St John's College, and three further days in the public schools.⁶⁴ He recorded:

Then when the day came of our being cap'd by the Vice-Chancellor, we were all called up in our Soph's gowns and our new square caps⁶⁵ and lamb-skin hoods on. There we were presented four by four, by our father⁶⁶ to the Vice-Chancellor saying out a sort of formal presentation speech to him.⁶⁷

The graduands took the required oaths, signed the University Register and kneeled before the Vice-Chancellor, who took each graduand's hands in his own and admitted him to the degree of Bachelor of Arts by touching him on the head with the New Testament. John Byrom, in 1711/12, graduating from Trinity College, Cambridge wrote to a friend:

I would fain have nothing hinder the pleasure I take in thinking how soon I shall change this tattered blue gown for a black one and a lambskin, and have the honourable title of Bachelor of Arts.⁶⁸

And as the *Gradus ad Cantabrigiam* recorded:

My head with ample square cap crown
And deck with hood my shoulders ...⁶⁹

By 1802 the ceremony of admitting a graduand—sometimes known in Cambridge as a 'questionist'—to his degree included the process of 'hoodling'.⁷⁰ The graduands assembled at the Senate House Gallery for the preliminary ceremonials and then descended from the gallery to be met by their bed-makers. At a given signal each bed-maker placed the 'rabbits fur' hood over the head of their graduand before the latter proceeded to take their oaths and be admitted to the degree of BA by the Vice-Chancellor.⁷¹ At Oxford the wealthy could dispense with their undergraduate garb in spectacular fashion as a 'grand compounder'. Grand compounders were those, usually sons of aristocrats and gentry, with an income in excess of three hundred pounds a year. In exchange for a higher fee for the BA—thirty pounds rather than the usual fee of seven pounds—they could graduate with an exalted processional place next to the Vice-Chancellor and wearing a bright red gown, which earned them the nickname 'university tulips'. The practice fell into disuse after 1817.⁷²

⁶⁴ De la Pryme was examined in rhetoric, logic, ethics, physics and astronomy.

⁶⁵ As an undergraduate de la Pryme wore a round cap. A 'Soph' was an undergraduate who had reached his ninth term.

⁶⁶ 'Father' meant the tutor who presented the graduand on behalf of his college.

⁶⁷ C. Wordsworth, *Scholae Academicae: Some Account of Studies at English Universities in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1877), pp. 23–24.

⁶⁸ H. Talon, *Selections from the Journals and Papers of John Byrom*, (London, 1950), p. 38. At Trinity the undergraduate gown was blue.

⁶⁹ Wordsworth, *Social Life...*, p. 524.

⁷⁰ Perhaps a corruption of 'hooding'.

⁷¹ Wordsworth, *Scholae Academicae*, p. 59.

⁷² G. V. Cox, *Recollections of Oxford* (London, 1870), pp. 250–51.

The academic dress of those who obtained degrees above that of BA, described by Vicesimus Knox as ‘velvet sleeves, scarlet gowns, hoods, black and red’, was often taken as evidence that ‘wisdom, science, learning ... flourish and abound.’⁷³ But it was not simply status and learning that different dress denoted. There were privileges that went with certain classes of undergraduates at both universities. For example visiting the markets at Cambridge was a privilege restricted to nobles and gentlemen-commoners, and the Proctors could punish any below those ranks who went there.⁷⁴ Pensioners were also forbidden to keep dogs, to take part in fencing, from 1708 they were forbidden to drive carriages and from 1791 to take part in duels.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The nature of undergraduate academic dress reflected the highly stratified and differentiated nature of eighteenth-century society. Aristocratic status remained at the apex of society, but men of wealth and enterprise—in land or commerce—entered a relatively open elite, moreover with the professionalization of the clergy, medicine and the law a new, putative, stratum of society was emerging that would become the ‘middle classes’. There was also the opportunity for men of talent to rise from plough-boy to bishop, as John Robinson did in the first decade of the eighteenth century. All these strands can be seen in the undergraduate community and in the dress that denoted their place in university society. Academic dress provided a visible indicator of status that was vital for the social interaction at the university to take place. Paul Langford and other historians have emphasized that eighteenth-century Britain was becoming a society in which ‘polite’ values were increasingly important.⁷⁶ Central to politeness was the assumption that each individual knew his place in society and the imagined boundaries that circumscribed it. For undergraduates that boundary was reflected in the colour, shape, cloth and decoration of their gowns and headwear. And it is clear that velvets, silks, bright dyes, tassels, shapes and designs of gowns and hats possessed a powerful influence as indicators of status and rank. But in a society in which advancement by merit was growing and in which wealth was not always an indicator of aristocratic standing, the social distinctions of dress were becoming anachronistic. The revolt of the servitors and sizars of 1769–70 was one which implied academic dress was part of a social rigidity that was irrelevant to the late eighteenth century. Certainly it seems that for much of the period under review undergraduates of all statuses pressed against the boundaries laid down by the universities’ authorities in matters of dress.

It should not be assumed, moreover, that conformity was absolute; indeed universities are by their nature likely to be centres of diversity rather than conformity. It is certainly the case that dress outside the universities was changing rapidly, and academically related dress of professional men (with the exception

⁷³ Quiller Couch, p. 160.

⁷⁴ The Proctors for the purpose of supervising the markets and fairs wore their hoods squared.

⁷⁵ Tanner, *passim*.

⁷⁶ P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1992). See also P. Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, 1660–1830* (London, 2000).

perhaps of lawyers) was falling away. This created a gulf between university dress and that of society at large, which inevitably made undergraduates question the reason for their garb. ‘Ambient dress’ and academic dress became two separate categories.⁷⁷ By 1832 academic dress was more of a ‘sartorial anachronism’ than it had been in 1660.⁷⁸ Certainly there were examples of rejection of the rigid system of academic dress, and of official exasperation at it. In 1816 there were sufficient instances of the flouting of dress regulations that they were reasserted at Oxford.⁷⁹ In Cambridge in 1799 Professor Pryme recalled that his uncle had been scandalized to see MAs wearing doctors’ bonnets.⁸⁰ And in the same year the new Vice-Chancellor, Mansel, inveighed against irregular dress at Cambridge.⁸¹ In 1816 new statutes at Cambridge imposed a punishment for the first three offences against the dress regulations, the fourth being referred to the Proctors for more formal disciplining such as rustication.⁸² By 1827 Dr Whewell complained that rules of academic dress were routinely infringed.⁸³ But this does not suggest that there was an absence of regulation, or that in the case of academic dress the eighteenth century should be viewed as an era of neglect or decay. Indeed the period was one in which both universities reformed their regulations.

⁷⁷ I owe the phrase ‘ambient dress’ to Bruce Christianson.

⁷⁸ I owe this idea and phrase to Susan North.

⁷⁹ Mallet, Vol. III, p. 194.

⁸⁰ Wordsworth, *The Undergraduate*, p. 134.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸³ W. Whewell, *On the Principles of English University Education* (London, 1837), p. 89.